

Striving for Holistic Success: How Lesbians Come Out on Top

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the prevalence of discrimination against employees who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) or simply appear to be (for a review see Croteau, 1996), some have become leaders in their field and are acknowledged as prominent, high-achieving individuals. Considering that LGBT individuals have a long history of discrimination and oppression in work and educational environments, their success is surprising. Research on the career development of LGBT populations has been limited (e.g. Chung, 1995; Lonborg & Phillips, 1996); however, theoretically-oriented writing on career development has identified several issues associated with the difficulties LGBT people may experience, including sexual identity development, barriers related to sexual orientation and sexual identity management (e.g. Fassinger, 1996; Irwin, 2002; Skelton, 2000). How LGBT individuals overcome these difficulties has remained unexplored.

As a young adult or adolescent, LGBT individuals may limit or abandon career choices as a consequence of the turmoil associated with sexual identity development (Fassinger, 1996, see also Monsen & Bailey, Chapter 19). Moreover, LGBT individuals may face external barriers to their career decision-making (e.g. discrimination, lack of social support), which may block career alternatives and restrict choices as a result of fear or need for safety (Chur-Hansen, 2004; Irwin, 2002; Morrow, Gore & Campbell, 1996; Skelton, 1999). Finally, how LGBT individuals handle self-disclosure of their sexual orientation may also affect their career success. Although some LGBT individuals may choose to 'pass' as heterosexual, others may disclose their orientation in the workplace.

Disclosing may have major repercussions on one's career, whereas passing may affect an individuals overall well-being (Humphrey, 1999; Prince, 1995; Raven, 2001).

Although LGBT issues are increasingly visible in western popular culture, anti-LGBT attitudes are still held in North America (Yang, 1999), as they are around the world. As a consequence of this bias, individuals who are outside this norm often lack the same privileges, particularly in their work. Several studies have found that employed LGBT individuals who experienced homophobia at work had reductions in perceived productivity, job satisfaction, organizational and career commitment, and organization-based self-esteem, as well as increases in perceived health problems, psychological distress and turnover intentions (Button, 2004; Humphrey, 1999; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Waldo, 1999). For example, Kitzinger's (1991) study revealed that lesbian and gay individuals in the UK continually faced decisions about the safety of revealing their sexual orientation and frequently concealed their sexual identity by introducing their lovers as friends and by changing pronouns. Thus, non-affirming organizational settings where homophobia is prevalent or tolerated is likely to be a major factor in limiting occupational success.

Although LGBT persons share the experience of sexual discrimination, a lesbian's occupational experience is influenced by both sexual and gender-based marginalization. Thus, in contrast with other less visible marginalized women, such as bisexual and transgendered women, lesbians may experience sexual and gender discrimination that affects their occupational success in unique ways. Despite multiple barriers, lesbians have become successful high achievers. For example, Ellen Degeneres, the star of a popular American sitcom in which she played herself, an 'out' lesbian, has gone on to host her own successful talk show called *Ellen*. In Canada, Prime Minister Paul Martin appointed Nancy Ruth, the well-known lesbian and feminist activist, to the Senate and, in the UK, Angela Mason was appointed Director of the Women and Equality Unit, following a lifetime of campaigning for LGBT civil rights. Thus, in the present study, we focus on the occupational success of lesbians, although some of the findings may relate to gay, bisexual and transgendered individuals (e.g. Button, 2004; Croteau, 1996; Irwin, 2002).

Occupational Success

To address the confusion surrounding the terms 'career' and 'occupation,' for the purposes of this study, the term occupation refers to paid employment or work. Whereas the terms career and 'career development' are used in reference to distinct theories and subsume the terms occupation and 'occupational success'. The lack of research on lesbians' occupational success implies that their career development does not differ from that of women in general, and ignores aspects of the career process that may be unique to lesbians. In an attempt to address the existing lacunae in the career development literature, in the present study we used a qualitative research methodology to develop a theoretical framework that explicates the occupational success of notable lesbians in Canada.

The concept of occupational success has many meanings that may differ for men and women and within men and women, as well as by social class, culture and sexual orientation. Definitions of occupational success vary considerably and range from intrinsic success (e.g. job satisfaction) to extrinsic success (e.g. salary, promotion, hierarchical position). Extrinsic organizational indicators of success may tell us little about the psy-

chological or intrinsic, subjective perceptions of women's own success (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987). Subjective feelings of success are a combination of the evaluations of significant others, self-evaluations compared with co-workers, and self-evaluations of career expectations (Frye, 1984). Frye concluded that self-perceptions of success are more highly related to satisfaction than objective criteria of success, such as salary. However, neither extrinsic nor intrinsic indicators of success account for the impact of broader social, political and institutional contexts on LGBT individuals' work experience.

Traditional definitions of career success that reflect white, male, middle-class standards of excellence have been criticized because they are not representative of the experiences of women or other minority groups (e.g. Fassinger & Richie, 1994). To address this problem, a research programme in the USA, the National Study of Women's Achievement (Fassinger, 2002), investigated the career development of more than 100 prominent women that include black African American women as well as white women (Richie et al., 1997), Asian American women (Prosser, Chopra & Fassinger, 1998), and women with disabilities (Noonan et al., 2004). The women in these studies were identified as successful, high achieving, or prominent by national organizations or the media. To date, results of this programme of research have suggested that predominantly non-linear career paths and exceptional ability to transform a challenge into an opportunity; extensive experiences with oppression; notable perseverance; dedication to work; reliance on internal standards of judgement; a wide variety of familial, cultural, educational and socio-political influences; supportive relationships; and a myriad of strategies for stress management are all factors that effect occupational success.

Career Theories: Context

Although traditional career theorists once equated career with paid employment and neglected non-work activities (e.g. Astin, 1984), more recent theorists have expanded existing definitions of career beyond paid employment to consider contextual factors (e.g. socio-cultural and political conditions). Three models of women's career development provided by Gomez et al. (2001), Poole and Langan-Fox (1997), and Richie et al. (1997), are particularly relevant to the present investigation because they explored the interactions amongst contextual, cultural and personal variables in the career development of several diverse populations. For example, Gomez et al. (2001) investigated the career development and success of 20 notable Latinas (i.e. women of Hispanic origin). Poole and Langan-Fox (1997) examined the careers, life satisfaction, and success of young Australian women ($n = 1489$) who were at the beginning of their careers (age 17), following them to age 35. Finally, Richie et al. (1997) investigated the career development of 18 prominent, high-achieving black African American and white women in the USA. Of note, across these studies, the authors found that socio-cultural and political conditions influenced the success of the women in their studies.

Gomez et al. (2001) posited that macro- and micro-environmental factors can either limit or facilitate vocational behaviours and are helpful in understanding the unique social and political context in which women operate. For example, they found that notable Latina women experienced challenges, barriers and support systems specific to their Latina cultural background. Moreover, political movements (e.g. Chicano [an ethnic minority group of Mexican Americans], and the Women's Movement) strongly influenced

and supported the career development of many Latinas. These factors are particularly important in understanding lesbians' career success because the socio-cultural and political context of their work experience differs from that of women in general and other minority groups in several ways.

As members of a stigmatized group, whose membership is not readily apparent, lesbians, as well as gay, bisexual and transgendered people must decide whether to reveal their sexual identity in the workplace or to their colleagues and clients, often fearing homophobia if they do so (Croteau, 1996; Kitzinger, 1991; Prince, 1995; Raven, 2001). This decision is complex and involves careful strategizing (Button, 2004; Cody & Welch, 1997; Kitzinger, 1991; Shachar & Gilbert, 1983; Waldo & Kemp, 1997). In contrast, those who choose to remain closeted often employ elaborate coping strategies (e.g. avoidance, passing as heterosexual) to maintain their invisibility (Cody & Welch, 1997; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Raven, 2001; Waldo & Kemp, 1997). In addition, sexual identity development is a process that may interact with the career development process (Boatwright, Gilbert, Forrest & Ketzenberger, 1996; Button, 2004; Woods, 1993). Lesbians who are preoccupied with the exploration of their sexual identity may neglect occupational planning or minimize their occupational choices in order to accommodate their sexual identity, potentially hindering their career success (Fassinger, 1996; Tomlinson & Fassinger, 2003). In addition, their sexuality may necessitate economic self-reliance; and for lesbian families, careers are mutually developed, as gender difference is not a factor in determining employment (Dunne, 2000). Finally, lesbians may be less likely than heterosexual men to have access to mentors and role models, a factor cited by career theorists as having a negative impact on the career development of women in particular (Fassinger, 1996).

In the Canadian workforce, LGBT individuals have legal protection under the Canadian Human Rights Code and sexual orientation became a prohibited ground for discrimination in 1992 (Casswell, 1996). Similar to Canada, the New Zealand Human Rights Act includes protection based on sexual orientation, and in Australia, several states (e.g. New South Wales, South Australia) prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 1999). Currently only 12 states in the USA prohibit employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (for both private and public employees). In the UK, The Employment Equality Regulations of 2003 prohibit discrimination in employment and vocational training based on sexual orientation (Department of Trade and Industry, 2005, see also Harding & Peel, Chapter 12). Despite their legal status, many employed lesbians, as well as gay men, bisexuals and transgendered persons continue to feel stigmatized and fear discrimination (e.g. Irwin, 2002; Raven, 2001).

In summary, the limited literature on lesbians' career development has identified important cultural and contextual factors that may contribute to career success; however, to date this literature has been mostly atheoretical and anecdotal and has a narrow focus on barriers and middle-class, white Americans (Croteau, 1996; Fassinger, 1996). Notably absent is attention to facilitative factors that may contribute to lesbians' (and gay men's, bisexuals' and transgendered people's) occupational success, despite the barriers they face. In the present study, we interviewed notable lesbians – women who had made an impact on their respective occupational fields. By studying lesbians who have achieved in their fields, despite multiple challenges, facilitates the identification of successful career strategies and healthy career development, despite sexual orientation.

METHOD

Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), a qualitative method, was chosen to describe and develop the concepts related to lesbians becoming successful in their occupations. Grounded theory is a comprehensive method of data collection and analytic procedures aimed at developing concepts and ultimately theory that is grounded in the data and developed directly from participants' experiences. We used in-depth semi-structured interviews and the grounded theory method of data analysis because we wanted to discover an emergent framework constructed from, and therefore grounded in the words and experiences of lesbians.

Participants

Volunteers were recruited from within the lesbian community in a large urban centre in Western Canada. The initial selection criteria focused on women identified by lesbian organizations as leaders in their fields (i.e. having influenced their field, community or society) and who self-identified as lesbians even though they may not have been open about their sexuality at work. All participants ($n = 15$) were attained through word of mouth, a strategy known as snowball sampling (Morse, 1991), having heard of the study from friends and individuals from the lesbian community.

The women ranged in age from 35 to 69 years ($M = 48$) and were employed in eight occupational fields (athletics, education, law/politics, business, arts, police, dentistry and medicine). The majority of the women made 2–7 occupational changes throughout their careers because of new opportunities, however, three (20.0%) women were fired, which they believed was directly related to their lesbianism, and several moved to work environments that they perceived as LGBT friendly. Thirteen (86.7%) women were white, one was First Nations (i.e. Canadian Native Indian) and one was Asian Canadian. The majority ($n = 12$; 80.0%) of these women were in relationships and considered their present work environment as LGBT friendly. Thirteen (86.7%) were out at work and two (13.3%) were selectively out at the time of the interviews. The women's annual salary ranged from \$40 000 (i.e. \$32 000 US, \$41 400 Australian, or £17 000) to \$175 000 Canadian (i.e. \$140 200 US, \$181 000 Australian, or £75 000) with the average \$86 000 (\$68 000 US, \$90 000 Australian, or £37 370). Six (40.0%) participants had post-graduate degrees, five (33.3%) had undergraduate degrees or were working towards them, two (13.3%) had professional degrees (law, medicine), and two (13.3%) had only a high school education. The majority ($n = 13$; 86.7%) considered themselves privileged, because of their economic status, education level or employment.

Procedures

For the respondents who met the criteria, a convenient place (e.g. their homes, workplace) was identified where a semi-structured interview (which was audio-taped), lasting approximately 1½ hours, was held. At the beginning of each interview, participants read and

signed an informed consent form. The initial interviews were conducted between February 2000 and May 2001. The interview questions were formulated from a review of the literature and experience with the phenomenon (after Hollingsworth, Tomlinson & Fassinger, 1997, see Appendix, p. 327). Open-ended questions were used to avoid imposing existing constructs and to facilitate probing deeper to uncover new dimensions of the process of lesbians becoming successful. Later interviews became more focused in order to explore particular concepts and to determine their inclusion in the evolving description of lesbians becoming successful in their occupations. Follow-up interviews were conducted with six of the initial participants who were chosen because they represented a variety of experiences. They were asked to comment on the developing categories, and whether anything was unclear or did not fit for them. Based on their responses, three paths were further articulated, *working 'in' silence*, *working quietly*, and *boldly 'out' spoken*.

Data Analysis

The basic principles and procedures of the grounded theory method were used to analyse the data, which included transcribed interviews and memos (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Memos were written immediately after each interview, and when reviewing audiotapes and reading the transcriptions. Three major types of coding procedures were used: open coding, axial coding and selective coding, each level progressively represented the gleaning of a more abstract view of the data. Open coding was employed in which the text was broken down into discrete parts (e.g. phrases, sentences) and code names were generated that reflected the essence of what was articulated. Open coding was done after each interview, prior to conducting the next interview. The results of this initial coding guided the following interviews (i.e. theoretical sampling).

Code names were systematically grouped that seemed to relate to the same phenomenon but at a more abstract level. These code names were compared with one another for similarities and differences and then were grouped into categories. Axial coding was employed to determine relationships amongst the code names, and was used to group code names into higher order key categories. This process led to the development of the constructs, which in turn, generated more questions and further data collection and analysis. As the concepts that emerged from the analysis became more and more cohesive, selective coding was employed, which involved integrating and refining constructs. At this level of analysis, the focus was on constructs and relationships that seemed core to the experience. *Striving for holistic success* was eventually developed as the core or central construct.

In the following description of the model, direct quotations from the lesbians are used for illustrative purposes. Italicized words represent participants' emphasis. All participants are identified by pseudonyms they selected. Following Richie et al. (1997), responses are discussed according to the following descriptors: (1) the words *generally*, *most*, *often*, *the majority*, *typically*, *many*, or *the women in this study* indicate a response characteristic of the majority (eight or more) of the participants; (2) the words *some*, *a number of*, or *several* indicate responses from three to seven participants; and (3) the words *a few* indicate responses from one or two participants.

FINDINGS

The emergent model explained the career success of 15 notable lesbians and is illustrated in Figure 15.1. The basic core process is conceptualized as a process of *striving for holistic integration*. The specific way that the women *manage their lesbian identity at work* is the beginning of this endeavour and is represented within a circle of contextual conditions. Based on the women’s strategies for managing their lesbian identity, they engaged in:

- taking risks and coming out
- working ‘in’ silence
- working quietly
- boldly ‘out’ spoken
- facing ongoing fear

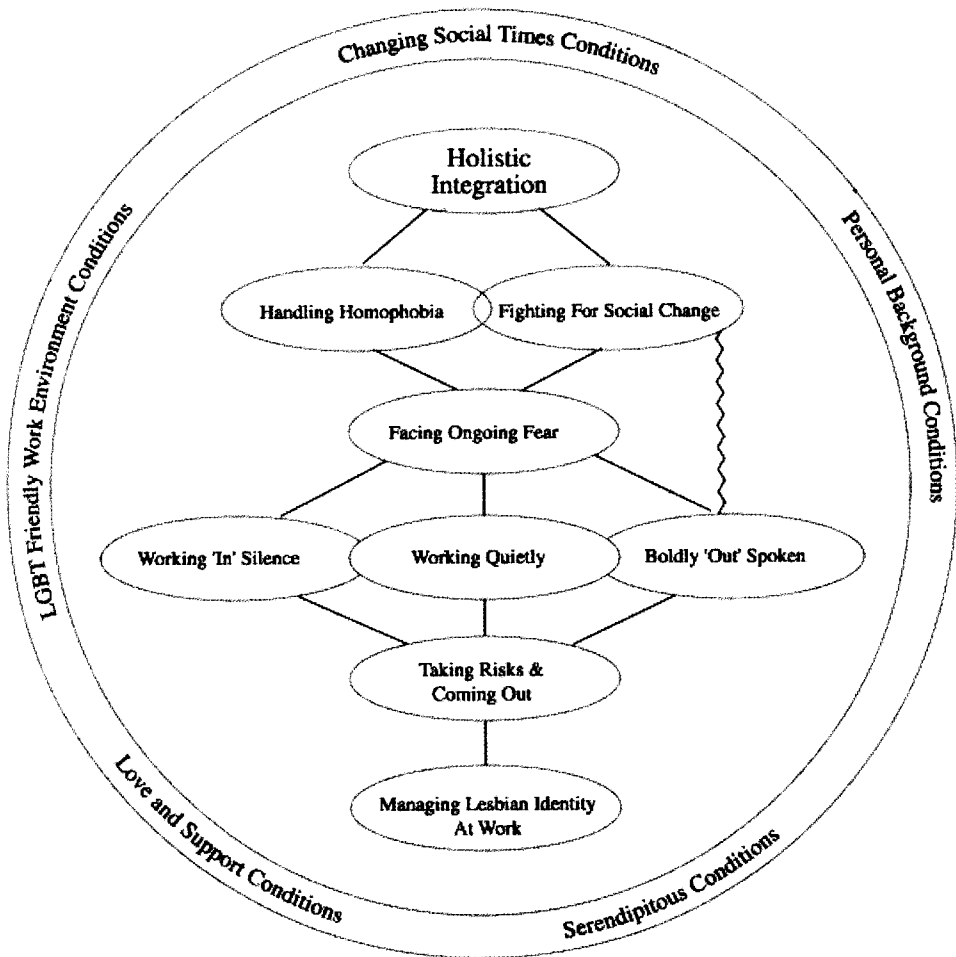


Figure 15.1 Conceptual ordering of the process of ‘striving for holistic integration’

- *handling homophobia*
- *fighting for social change*
- *holistic integration*

Striving for holistic integration consists of processes that are affected by and enacted within the following contextual conditions: (1) *changing social times* (i.e. 1930 to present), (2) *personal background*, (3) *serendipitous conditions* (e.g. being in the right place at the right time), (4) *love and support*, and (5) *a LGBT-friendly work environment*. This basic process was affected by the changing social times that exerted an influence on participants' personal background and serendipitous conditions, which in turn, affected the current context of participants' lives, which included love and support, and a LGBT-friendly work environment. These changing conditions interacted synergistically, continuously influencing lesbians striving for holistic integration.

Managing Lesbian Identity in the Workplace

For the lesbians in the present study, the first step in the process of striving for holistic integration was managing their lesbian identity as it related to their work. For many, this involved appraising the situation to determine its potential threat, harm, or loss should they reveal their lesbian identity. For example, Leona appraised the consequences of being a lesbian as 'living in a tortured world, in a well of loneliness'. Early in their careers, many participants considered coming out at work as too risky. However, several women experienced managing their lesbian identity as more of a challenge than a threat, and subsequently were truthful and open about their lesbian identity, eventually becoming advocates for other lesbians by fighting for social change.

Taking Risks and Coming Out

Taking risks and coming out reflected ways the women managed their lesbian identity in their careers. The majority of the women were out at work at the time they were first interviewed. The process of taking risks is represented by a continuum of coming out at work, ranging from working 'in' silence to the boldly 'out' spoken path. Over time, participants shifted along this continuum as conditions changed (e.g. societal attitudes towards LGBT individuals, choosing to work in a LGBT-friendly work environment, being 'outed'). For example, Jan taught at a university and had her first lesbian novel published in the 1960s when it was illegal to be a lesbian. Because of the social times and the risk of losing her university position, Jan described how she dealt with this issue, 'as long as you were decorous and didn't make a fuss and were good at your work, people turned a blind eye'. This strategy, to work quietly, enabled her to write what she chose despite living and working in a social context where criminality and lesbianism were considered synonymous. Later in her career, Jan recalled the difficult decision to be boldly 'out' spoken with a piece of lesbian non-fiction she was writing. Having the love and support of family was a condition that facilitated Jan's decision to write the book that was her official public outing, despite the consequences.

Working 'In' Silence

Working 'in' silence was a path chosen early in the careers of several participants who feared they might face discrimination because of their lesbianism. Several participants began their careers in the early 1970s, a time Leona described as 'a deeply underground life in those days when people snuck around after dark and didn't tell anybody what they were doing'. Fear of sexual orientation discrimination and anti-LGBT harassment led a few participants to hide their lesbian identity at some point along their career path.

When Aggie began her career as an educator, it was not safe to come out because of the social climate at the time. Early in her career colleagues thought she was straight because she attended events with 'boyfriends'. Although Aggie felt she had no choice but to separate her work and private life, she thought 'that it cost me, because I didn't establish relationships with people within my work sphere'. Cowgirl found herself in a sport milieu with other lesbians who were not out, and managed her lesbian identity by working 'in' silence, but feeling the unspoken support of her lesbian team mates – a 'kind of supportive club'. Leona had a sense of being in two worlds and learning two languages (i.e. LGBT and straight) as a strategy to cope with and to hide her lesbian identity at work. In the 1980s, Haze feared coming out both personally and professionally, and made her relationship invisible to the outside world:

I didn't tell anybody for a really long time, you know that whole fear thing; it was in the '80s for God's sake. But we still ran a two-bedroom house for the longest time. It wasn't until we had the puppies six years ago [that] we went down to a one-bedroom house.

A number of the women who began their careers working 'in' silence, eventually shifted along the continuum of taking risks and coming out. Several catalysts acted to catapult a few of them out of the closet at work. For example, Cowgirl initially chose the working 'in' silence path but after being fired from her position as head coach of a national team because of her lesbianism, she followed the boldly 'out' spoken path, acting as a lesbian spokesperson in the community and telling her story on national television. Negative rumours of Leona's lesbian identity acted as the catalyst for a pivotal turn along her occupational path in the police force. To her surprise, Leona received support from close work colleagues, which encouraged her to come out to other colleagues. For Leona, coming out at work was a turning point in her career because she no longer felt she had to expend considerable energy living a secret life. Rather, coming out represented an opportunity to be truthful and to focus new found energy on work.

Working Quietly

Working quietly within the system was a strategy that did not draw attention to the women's lesbian identity and thus cause embarrassment for themselves or their colleagues. Even though they maintained the status quo, some lesbians were able to move into positions of power that allowed them to make positive changes for women and LGBT individuals. A number of the women suspected that others knew about their lesbian identity, but it remained unspoken. These women did not try to hide the fact that they were lesbian, nor did they bring it up when it was not relevant to the task or topic at hand. For example,

Artemis, the psychologist, usually did not discuss her lesbian orientation with heterosexual clients because either it was irrelevant or it could be detrimental to their therapy. Overtime, several of the women felt more comfortable with being out at work and were less inclined to broadcast their lesbian identity, but to work quietly within the system. For example, Leona, the police officer, who experienced boldly coming out to her close colleagues after facing rumours, described how she chose to quietly handle the rumours and recalled the beneficial consequences of not waving her 'rainbow' flag (i.e. a LGBT pride symbol) and announcing her lesbian status:

It's true that I went the quieter way, and it's true it had some major potholes in it, but I never would have been comfortable just leaping out in the middle and waving my flag no matter what happened. By handling the rumours quietly, I believe I earned even more respect instead of running and screaming to human rights [abuses].

Boldly 'Out' Spoken

The majority of women were primarily boldly 'out' spoken at work at the time of their interview. However, several of the participants felt that they had been boldly 'out' spoken about their lesbian identity right from the start of their career. In the early 1970s, Kathleen felt she was in a privileged environment for coming out because she was at the University of California, which was considered a lesbian Mecca. Similarly, Stella was boldly 'out' spoken at work as soon as she recognized her lesbianism. She attributed this to being in a stereotypical LGBT-friendly work environment (e.g. beauty salon), but also she believed that her personality demanded forthrightness: 'because of who I am, I tell it like it is, no bullshit, no secrets'. Reflecting on her career, Dad, the lawyer stated: 'I never thought I was straight, never pretended I was straight, so coming out for me wasn't sudden, it was always knowing and just always dealing with life on that basis'.

Several women were in careers that made them visible to the public. This visibility propelled them even further out. As they became known as lesbians, some women appeared in international, national, provincial and local media, where they either deliberately or inadvertently came out to the public at large. For example, Jan's work as an author outed her on the international scene. When her book became a successful movie, her notoriety reached an even wider audience, which she used to advocate for LGBT rights. Nina's career took a pivotal turn when one of her occupational roles included being the media spokesperson for the LGBT community, which was engaged in a lengthy battle for LGBT rights involving book censorship. Her visibility as an out lesbian became national, provincial and local news on a regular basis for over 15 years. Mia discussed the importance of being boldly 'out' spoken and challenging stereotypes in her work:

I think it's very important for me to be visible and to be out. Because I think that if we still have stereotypes of who gays and lesbians are, that needs to be challenged. I think people are challenged when they see an Asian lesbian and I think people are challenged when they see a woman, a lesbian in a professional capacity, or in a senior capacity who is out, especially for young people.

Many participants discussed how fortunate they were to be born into a privileged family, society, or country with considerable intelligence, personality and opportunities. For example, Dad noted how her 'gifts' (e.g. emotional strength) helped her endure and beat

breast cancer without interrupting or delaying her career. Lisa described herself as having a sense of resiliency, or a feeling of 'being capable of surviving'. This privilege was considered a powerful factor that helped several women cope with difficult circumstances throughout their careers and contributed to their determination to be boldly 'out' spoken at work.

The majority of participants noted how important being true to themselves had been for their career and that it facilitated their ability to follow the boldly 'out' spoken path. The process of being true often involved taking risks and being open about their lesbianism or simply speaking their minds on important issues they passionately believed in.

Facing Ongoing Fear

Although the women managed their lesbian identity by taking risks and coming out, most of them reported *facing ongoing fear*. This involved an element of uncertainty and threat, as the women were aware of the potential for negative reactions from others in the work environment. Facing ongoing fear was a process whereby participants continually had to make decisions regarding coming out to different people in different work contexts. This ongoing fear is portrayed well by Dad's analogy, 'It's what being black probably feels like. In most cases it's fine, but you never know what you might encounter'. As Leona moved along the continuum from working 'in' silence, to boldly 'out' spoken, to working quietly, she experienced the positive effects of facing her ongoing fears, which had silenced her for many years. Moreover, feeling safe and accepted as a lesbian in her work environment facilitated facing her ongoing fears:

You lose the fear of being ridiculed, humiliated, embarrassed and persecuted. It just isn't there. Everything is so right that it's comforting. I've lost the worry I used to have about someone else's discomfort. You don't lose fear until you feel safe. There's a direct relationship, so, for fear to go away needs to come trust or belief that where you are in a safe place. Losing fear allows you to be true to yourself; allows you to stand up and be counted.

Two older participants (aged 53 and 62) decided to be boldly 'out' spoken from the beginning of their careers. As activists, they fought for social change and were considered pioneers in their work in this regard. Their early politicization may have been a factor that explained their route to success devoid of ongoing fear. For example, Kathleen recognized that she had the protection and safety of a large activist community, which empowered her to be fearless in her work as an out lesbian. Similarly, when Lisa began her career as a physician, she was in a social milieu that facilitated her involvement as a feminist and activist for women's rights. This early politicization combined with her prestigious position in the community may have contributed to her confidence and unwillingness to be driven by fear on route to her occupational success.

In contrast, several participants lived through painful circumstances and felt rejected when they took risks and came out at work. However, these women were able to face ongoing fear by turning 'obstacles into usefulness' by dealing directly with the problems they encountered. Facing ongoing fear included *handling homophobia* and *fighting for social change*. By facing ongoing fears associated with their careers, the lesbians became

empowered and transformed. This transformation happened as these women took responsibility for their own role in coming out and stood up for their rights as lesbians.

Handling Homophobia

One of the consequences of facing ongoing fears for many of the women was handling homophobia, which encompassed the ways in which participants recognized and handled prejudice or bias by their colleagues, presumably because of their lesbianism. Kathleen encapsulated the meaning of homophobia by using the term 'lesbophobia' to define homophobia specific to lesbians:

In my usage, 'lesbophobia,' fear of and hatred toward lesbians, is expressed in attitudes and actions based on prejudice. Widespread prejudice translates into social/political/economic discrimination, whereby dominate group's benefit at the expense of minority groups, which is institutionalized prejudice.

Many of the women faced lesbophobia, which was expressed in attitudes (e.g. rumours, harassment) and actions (e.g. loss of friends and family, hate mail, workplace being bombed), some of which led to discrimination (e.g. being fired, financial ruin, censored books). In addition, a few women reported that because they anticipated discrimination their fear of homophobia silenced them. Generally, the women addressed issues of homophobia directly by challenging the source. For example, two participants were fired from their jobs in the early 1980s, a time when they had no legal recourse because LGBT individuals were not yet protected under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Although legal protection for LGBT people was not in place at that time, one woman handled this situation successfully by standing up for herself and settling out of court. In contrast, another participant filed a complaint against her employer and requested same sex benefits in the 1990s, a move that was perceived by her colleagues as likely to limit her career. However, her case was successfully challenged, a sign of the changing social times that reflects the progress that has been made toward equality and freedom for LGBT people.

Several women handled homophobia by being open and honest, yet respectful of others' feelings when dealing with perceived bias and discrimination. Moreover, others were unrelenting about educating people and used humour to diffuse situations. Jan identified positive benefits that went along with successfully handling homophobia, 'a lot of the places of negative judgement, of silencing, in fact turned out to be places where you could hone your skill and your nerve, and your courage and insight'. Many other women chose to reframe a negative event by 'creating something positive'. For example, participants who were fired from their positions commented on the wonderful new opportunities that opened up for them as a consequence of experiencing discrimination.

Because of the emotional support provided by others, several women were able to overcome very painful experiences at work, which gave them the confidence and determination to continue striving in the face of adversity. Long-term relationships (i.e. 5–45 years) were experienced as providing the love and support needed to handle difficulties at work and to become successful in their careers. The women also handled homophobia by expanding their community through intimate, authentic relationships with those they came out to. In addition, many women sought support from the LGBT community and professional organizations.

It is important to note that a few women felt that they had never encountered homophobia. These women did not take potentially homophobic situations seriously or personally. Wadamga, an artist, said, 'I don't really notice it. I'm kind of oblivious to it. I'm aware that if something isn't working then I need to change it, but it's not going to stop me'. In contrast, Mia, an Asian Canadian who felt that she passes as heterosexual, did not feel that she had experienced discrimination at work. Although these women were not overt targets of homophobia, they dealt with homophobia at work by the way they responded to LGBT jokes and by fighting for LGBT rights.

Fighting for Social Change

Facing ongoing fear at work also involves fighting for social change for women and LGBT people. The interaction of conditions (e.g. LGBT-friendly work environment, changing social times, love and support) and coming out at work resulted in facing ongoing fear, which motivated participants to fight for social change in unique ways. Some women did not face ongoing fears but passionately fought for social change most of their lives. For these women, fighting for social change occurred at the individual as well as the broader societal level. It was often experienced as transformational for those who moved from working 'in' silence, to speaking out, and finally to making a difference for LGBT people in the workforce. Giving back to the LGBT community enhanced these women's feelings of pride about the changes they made to the work environment. The women's activities included public advocacy, running for public office, volunteering time and money to LGBT organizations, serving as role models for younger women and lesbians, and working directly with lesbian clients.

Holistic Integration

Many participants felt as though they lived in two separate worlds, a work world and a lesbian world, a split that seemed necessary to survive in a world perceived as homophobic. By facing their ongoing fears and feelings of fragmentation, many of the women experienced a sense of holistic integration. When these women felt safe, found their voice, spoke their truth and embraced previously cut off lesbian identities, they experienced holistic integration on several levels. In contrast, for a few women who did not feel that their work and lesbian lives were separate, holistic integration occurred early in their careers. Given that they had not experienced major obstacles in the work, striving for holistic integration felt smooth and natural.

Holistic integration was a continuous process as the conditions in the women's lives changed and new environments and social times influenced how they managed their lesbian identities at work. For several women, integrating their lesbian and work worlds was the result of being outed, but with positive consequences. For example, when Haze was outed by her partner's illness, she found her relationships with colleagues to be much more honest.

Many of the women felt that their lesbian identities enhanced their courage to be themselves and engage in occupational paths that led to success. For example, Jack chose to work harder as a shield against potential homophobia and said, 'In the end you feel that

you are stronger in the face of discrimination to counter any of their claims'. By being open, Haze felt that 'it ends up giving you confidence, giving you passion and conviction in the life that you have chosen. By being truthful and forthright in your life, it breaks down barriers'.

DISCUSSION

The central process that is described in the present study specifies common aspects of the experiences of lesbians becoming successful. By employing the grounded theory method, we developed concepts that originate in the experiences of lesbians, rather than from heterosexuals on whom existing theories of women's career development are based.

Similar to many of the women's career development theories, the theoretical model of the process of striving for holistic integration includes both individual and environmental influences that affect occupational success (e.g. Astin, 1984; Fitzgerald & Betz, 1994). It is also congruent with the more recently developed models of women's career development (e.g. Gomez et al., 2001; Poole & Langan-Fox, 1997). All are dynamic, interactive person-environment models of women's career development and career success that consider personal background and individual characteristics; as well as social, cultural and contextual variables. The present study identifies individual conditions (i.e. personal background, and love and support conditions), environmental conditions (i.e. LGBT-friendly work environment, serendipitous conditions), and cultural and contextual conditions (i.e. changing social times, discrimination, homophobia) that dynamically interact and influence the central process of striving for holistic integration that facilitated participants' occupational success as they integrated their lesbian and work worlds.

Lesbians in the present study experienced unique work-related experiences by virtue of their lesbian identities. Managing their lesbian identities at work was a crucial consideration that often involved purposeful decision-making and initiated the process of striving for holistic integration. The process extends personal and environmental models of women's career development by considering the influence of purpose and meaning in the unique context of these lesbians' lives. The process of becoming successful often involved finding meaning in the face of adversity and appraising benefit from undesirable circumstances, or 'turning obstacles into usefulness'. Some lesbians let go of untenable goals (e.g. coaching at the National level) because of homophobic circumstances and formulated new goals that ultimately created positive opportunities.

Several of the women in the study began their careers concealing their lesbian identity; however, over time all of the participants came out at work to varying degrees. Findings from the present study are consistent with other studies that found a strong relationship between being open about one's sexual orientation, and greater levels of support as well as job satisfaction (Humphrey, 1999; Jordan & Deluty, 1998; Morrow, Campbell & Beckstead, 1995). Although the women were well aware of the potential for discrimination or harassment because of their lesbianism, remaining silenced and invisible was perceived as costly to them personally and professionally. The potential for job loss or discrimination was real for these participants, however, the majority of them felt that they had proven themselves in their work, had chosen or created LGBT-friendly work environments, and were surrounded by loving and supportive people that helped them face ongoing fear and to continue to take risks and come out at work.

Empirical investigations have primarily focused on the coping strategies LGBT people employ at work in order to conceal their sexual identities; however, in the present study we identified coping strategies that were facilitative for an 'out' lesbian identity at work. The women in our study used strategies to deal with challenges at work that ranged from pursuing legal avenues to assertively voicing their concerns. For the women who felt they could change the situations they were in, congruent with stress theory, they directly challenged the source of distress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). On the other hand, participants who worked 'in' silence reported avoiding lesbian issues, evading social contact and seeking social support. In addition, many of the women used cognitive reframing strategies that focused on finding a positive way out of a negative situation, a coping strategy that has not been revealed in the extant literature.

Meaning-based coping helps the individual relinquish untenable goals and formulate new ones, find meaning in what has happened and appraise benefit where possible, even when the events have unsatisfactory outcomes (Folkman & Greer, 2000). In addition, this type of coping generates positive affect and motivates further coping. Many of the participants in this study who initially chose the working 'in' silence path were catapulted out of the closet in their various work environments. Although these events were initially viewed as having unsatisfactory outcomes (e.g. getting fired), all of the participants who experienced such loss and pain found meaning and benefit that equipped them with further coping resources. For example, some changed occupations or work environments in order to more easily integrate their lesbian identities at work.

Pearson and Bieschke (2001), in their investigation of high-achieving African American women, found that experiences with discrimination and racism heightened the women's level of determination in their careers and the extent to which they effectively attended to and coped with racism. The narratives of the lesbians in the present study were remarkably similar. Despite obstacles and setbacks (e.g. lost their job, friends and families), they engaged in practices and political advocacy that allowed them to develop a strength and capacity to cope effectively. Their ability to reframe negative experiences and gain a broader positive perspective equipped them with unique coping resources that prepared them for dealing with homophobia at work and in society at large.

Many of the lesbians in our study actively used their lesbian identities to address societal homophobia. By fighting for social change, these women became empowered as they found their voices and the courage to fight for legal and social policy changes within the workplace and, in some cases, on a broader societal level. By actively engaging in and pioneering workplace policies for LGBT people, many of these women have been instrumental in building a LGBT community, a process that has been healing and transformational on an individual and community level.

Although there is no existing career development theory that includes the construct of holistic integration, Juntunen et al. (2001), in their study of the meaning of career for American Indians, described the concept 'living in two worlds'. The separate Native and white worlds left American Indians feeling misunderstood and often disconnected. Similarly, the lesbians in our study who lived separate private and public lives often sought refuge in the LGBT community where they felt more authentic, validated and understood. Juntunen and co-workers also found that American Indians moved along a continuum from living in two worlds, to moving between two worlds, to evolving to a holistic third world where they were able to appreciate their own culture and integrate those pieces of the majority culture that they accepted. Similarly, the lesbians in our study who moved

along the continuum of coming out that led to holistic integration experienced an expansiveness that opened them to new possibilities in the work world, and established connections with heterosexual colleagues from whom they had previously been distanced. As a consequence, because the lesbians no longer had to hide a part of themselves, they experienced a renewed energy that was available for work.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged. The sample size is a limitation because it affects the transferability of the findings. The sample represents a limited range of ages, cultural backgrounds and professional fields. The sample size did not permit greater variability (e.g. lower social-economic status, younger women), which may have modified the findings. However, eight occupational fields were represented, including several in which lesbians are more likely to be closeted (i.e. police officer, educator). The criteria used to select successful lesbians were subjective, as there is no unambiguous definition of 'successful'. The women in the study were predominately out at the time of the interviews; therefore the experience of women who are presently closeted and successful is limited. However, because many of the participants described being closeted at some time in their past, the findings do represent a range of experiences in regard to being out or closeted at work.

All of the women in this study were living in a large metropolitan city on the west coast of Canada at the time of their interview. This region is noted for being LGBT friendly compared to many regions in Canada that are not. Therefore, the findings may not reflect the experiences of lesbians that are living in more conservative regions.

Implications for Research and Practice

The present study has only begun to illuminate the process of lesbians becoming successful in their occupations. Future research needs to increase variation in participants and data sources. The experience of women representing other demographic groups are clearly needed, such as women of colour, women with disabilities, bisexual women, transgendered, as well as working-class women. In addition, comparing lesbians from other regions of the country, and from rural areas, would contribute to our knowledge of how geography and the social, political environment may influence the process of lesbians becoming successful in their occupations.

The current sample was restricted because the majority of women were visibly out and some identifiable in the media. Further research focusing on those who are more closeted would contribute to our understanding of factors that contribute to their invisibility in the workforce and the coping strategies these women use to conceal their lesbian identities at work. Research that focuses on cognitive factors such as self-efficacy and goal mechanisms (e.g. Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994) would be useful to better understand how lesbians cope with difficult circumstances. Greater attention to the constructs of 'taking risks and coming out' that lead to the continuum of coming out is warranted. Further research on the construct 'fighting for social change' may prove useful in illuminating the role politicization (e.g. Gomez et al., 2001) has on lesbians' occupational success. In addition,

the construct 'holistic integration' has not previously been identified in the literature. Further research is needed to explore the dimensions of this category in order to further our understanding of this complex construct on both intrapersonal and interpersonal levels.

Our findings have important implications for psychological well-being and personal and interpersonal growth. Managing sexual identity at work by taking risks and coming out contributed to a sense of wholeness and balance in work and personal lives, and the majority of the women in this study no longer felt their lives were fragmented as they began to integrate their work and lesbian worlds. As they became open about their lesbian identity, they felt free to be themselves and to experience relationships with colleagues based on honesty. With this knowledge, career counsellors may be in a better position to help lesbian clients understand the psychological and vocational benefits of coming out at work and to help incorporate balance and holistic health practices into their lifestyle (Miller & Brown 2005). However, the lesbian client's personal background, love and support, work environment, social climate and serendipitous conditions need to be addressed in order to understand the complexity of the interaction between the personal and professional that leads to holistic integration and occupational success.

Concluding Remarks

The significance of this study lies in its potential to enhance current therapeutic and career counselling practices as well as its promising contribution to future career development theories that include the experiences of LGBT persons. The vocational counsellor who is familiar with the unique work issues that lesbians' face can provide competent, ethical services. Sensitivity to factors related to lesbian identity, such as minority group status, coming out and employment discrimination, is required of counsellors who seek to understand and work with lesbians. It is critical that professionals working with lesbians understand the complexity of their career paths in order to meet their vocational needs. They also need to recognize the internal and external processes and coping strategies that successful lesbians employ to overcome external barriers and achieve occupational success. In addition, career counsellors need to be aware of their own homophobic attitudes, values and prejudices regarding lesbian issues. The significance of this study lies in its potential to enhance current therapeutic and career counselling practices as well as its promising contribution to future career development theories, which include the experiences of lesbians. Finally, it is hoped that this study has rendered visibility to the uniqueness and complexity of lesbians' successful occupational experiences. These findings may facilitate an improvement in the workplace environment for both lesbians and their co-workers and empower lesbians to become the best they can be by being true to themselves.

APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

The following questions served as a guide and were modified as necessary depending on the emerging concepts and relationships between concepts.

1. Describe the path that brought you to your current position?
2. Have there been any external challenges and limitations that you have dealt with in order to achieve in your occupation? If yes, how have they affected your occupational path?
3. Tell me about your coming out process?
4. Has your coming out process affected your occupational path?
5. How have you dealt with disclosure at work?
6. Do you identify with a specific culture or community that has influenced your occupational path? If yes, how has this influenced your path?
7. Is there anything about your beliefs or values that has had an influence on your success?
8. How would you define occupational success? Based on your definition, do you consider yourself successful?
9. How do you feel about how far you have come?
10. Have you ever changed jobs or geographic locations because of your sexual orientation?
11. Has work protection for lesbians and gays influenced your career? If so, in what ways?
12. Are there any other things in your life that have had a significant influence on your occupational success?
13. Is there anything else you feel is important in relation to your occupational success that I have not asked?

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